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THE FRENCH CANADIAN LITERARY MOVEMENT

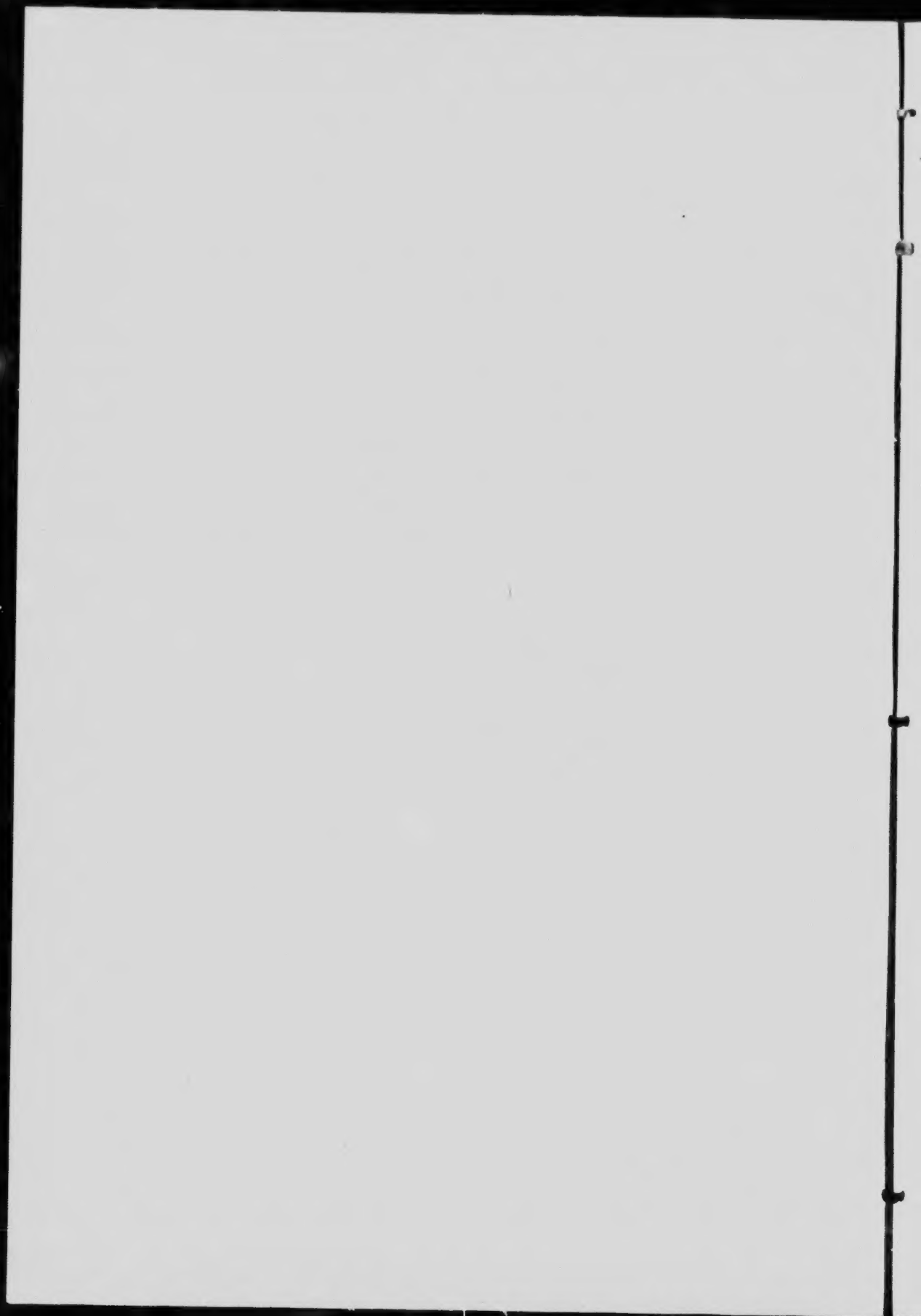
BY

BERNARD MUDDIMAN

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EMILE NELLIGAN.



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BY BERNARD MUDDIMAN.

TOWARDS the end of the nineties, about the time the *Mercure de France* and *La Plume* attained middle age in Paris and the last of "Les Jeunes" with his long locks, lace tie and velvet lappels had disappeared, we have a curious instance of literary movements repeating themselves in remote parts of the world. "Les Jeunes" reappeared in Montreal, Canada. Even as far back as 1892 the *Echo des Jeunes* appeared in Montreal with the cry "ce sera un journal libre, non de cette liberté qui rend fou, mais de cette liberté qui rend sage." Liberty from what? From the church, stereotyped ideas and the conventional technique of the literature of French Canada of Cremazie, Frechette and Chapman. It was the first step to emancipate the thought of the country where literature and the arts had been almost entirely in the hands of the priests. A band of young men—called by their enemies les jeunes Barbares—gathered together. The verses of men like Baudelaire and Verlaine began to be read and printed in the Montreal journals. A seed of modern culture was sown. A school of young writers began to stammer the first words of freedom. By 1895 when the *Echo des Jeunes* was on its last legs a few grown boys who had just left college and who had been brought into earlier contact than their elders with views hailed as advanced in the sleepy old streets of Quebec or the busy modern ultra-commercial squares of Montreal determined to found a literary society.

Like the Pre-Raphaelites they issued a proclamation of their principles. It appeared in the principal Montreal papers and commenced: "A group of young men of this city have decided to form themselves into an école de littérature. A list of officers followed this with the statement that they would revise "les travaux des jeunes littérateurs." The older writers either received this declaration of war in profound silence or with sarcasm. For three years the formation proceeded silently until in the ancient abode of the old French Governors of Montreal le château de Ramezay, the soirées of the château de

Ramezay were established very much like the Rhymer's Club at the old Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street. On a Friday evening they met in the old Chateau, now a museum for Indian arrows and tomahawks and relics, its walls hung with the portraits of old Colonial Governors and French Canadian explorers. They were four lawyers, five students, a notary, a painter, an engraver, two journalists, a doctor and a librarian, seated around a green cloth table. They would read to one another their manuscripts and criticize and talk. Of course, as in similar gatherings the pow-wow predominated; but, a seed was sown. From 1898 to 1900 the meetings continued till personal ambition and jealousy worked the usual havoc. The meetings were treated as a huge joke by staid commercial Montreal, like all colonial centres of trade, the most apathetic place in all the world to art. But *Les Jeunes* took themselves seriously. They read and talked Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Zola, Maupassant and any book or author indexed. Above all they wrote—dreaming of a literary and artistic Montreal with memories of the true world of Bohemian Paris. Like a flash in the pan, however, the meetings broke up, in the end, in personal bickerings. Leaving what? They left Nelligan, Lozeau and, indirectly, Girard. If these three have not evolved anything epoch makingly French Canadian, they have, at any rate, written literature, which is more than can be said for the other French Canadian writers.

Nelligan is, perhaps, the prince of these "*Jeunes*", who trod the island where once the red skin pitched his wigwam, and later the voyageur and *courreur-de-bois* of French Canada came to build their watch fires. A young man of disordered intellect, if you like, but who had something of real genius—the son of an Irish father and a French mother, born in 1883, he went mad in 1902. He had a genuine aesthetic face, says his friend Louis Dantin—the head of a dreamy Apollo tortured by the agony of his thoughts. Its pallor accentuated the clear-cut features. Large black questioning eyes, in which blazed the incendiarism of enthusiasm. He wore masses of long floating wonderful hair, as black as the long Canadian winter nights, like an aureole, and of which he was inordinately proud. Such was Nelligan, and his character harmonized with what one saw, at once sympathetic and fantastic. The dual blood of the

parents that ran in his veins gave him a deal of Irish winsomeness of disposition, of French vivacity and staccato passions. He had the Irishmen's love of congenial company, the Frenchman's adoration for his mother. He was one with those other young men who were going to wave the flag of art, for art's sake, and though with them was not of them. He sang of his sister as only a good garçon at the Lycée does. At the weekly meetings of the club he used to read his latest sonnet or poem; and few recognized, at first, that there was something here none of the others possessed.

In the exotic atmosphere of an intellectual delirium young men fresh from their courses at McGill or Laval, and fresh from an extra-mural course of their own in Baudelaire and Verlaine, Novalis, and Plotinus, Edgar Allan Poe and Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Île d'Adam and Hugo, Whitman and Mallarmé were building, they finally hoped, the foundations of a Canadian literature; the kingdom of Quebec was their nation. Unwittingly, with their vague notions of Nietzsche and the Superman, Rénan and the historical method, mixed with dashes of Maeterlinck, they were preparing the fall of the clerical power in Breton Quebec, the most priest-ridden corner of the globe. There was an exquisite jumble of mental theories and ideas. The inner life was revealed, the ivory tower of dreams proudly piled on high. Saintliness, claptrap, Péladan and the Rose-Croix, Emersonianism, transcendentalism, the over-soul, the religion of art, the mystic science of religion, the virtue of wickedness had come to them in far-off echoes from the mouth of those who had studied medicine in the beloved distant Paris of their dreams; or had crept to them in smuggled copies of those books that the Archbishop of Montreal, Mgr. Bruchesi, had so carefully indexed. Few had read Rénan but they all admired him immensely and intensely. Any clerical thunderbolt against rationalism secretly filled their souls with pride as they nursed in their breasts, hidden from the world, vague notions of Anatole France and the ideas of the boulevards. What has been the result of this? A gradual opening up and plain speaking on the part of French Canadian newspapers and French Canadian literature in Canada; a more exactive clerical censorship of the libraries, a hindrance put on all those young men who would study in Paris, for is not Paris,

as the "La Vérité" the great organ of the Catholic Church in Canada, says: "un foyer de science et aussi, hélas, un foyer de corruption et d'impiété." So the conclusion is: "il vaut infiniment mieux pour notre pays avoir des médecins, un peu moins savants mais religieux, que des médecins un peu plus savants mais impies." But the battle is going on and, imperceptibly, youth is winning; the youth of each successive generation is removing the fetters and shackles of ignorance the great mediaeval church would bind on her devout people.

Modern French influences are beginning to permeate into brains and hearts that have been starving for them since Laval's own days, and art as ever is in the vanguard of liberty leading the way with the triumphant golden letters of "Freedom of mind and senses" starred on her banner. The spirit that isolated the French Canadian priests at Rome from all contact with the liberal clerics of France is writhing already in the hands of Reason. To isolate the Canadian Church, keep it three hundred years behind every other branch of the Roman Catholic Church in the world; to isolate the Canadian people from the thought, life and art of Paris is as futile as it is ridiculous. Yet such is the aim of her ecclesiasts.

These young men and, above all, Nelligan admired Bohemianism with its delightful vagaries of the Boul'Miche. He heard of Gérard de Nerval's lobster and Gautier's scarlet waistcoat. He dreamt of an absinthe drinking Latin Quarter, of endless bocks and amours, Henri Murger, Romanticism and Trilby and of the properties of stage Bohemia. He must be forgiven, for Paris is very far from French Canada. He dreamt of an artistic life at Paris, ever "épatant le bourgeois," frequenting the old Café d'Harcourt, the Moulin Rouge and Bul-lier's Ball and everything else absurd. He wandered from Montreal brasserie to brasserie. When his new clothes came home from the tailor's he threw drink on them, stained them with wine and grease. Hadn't de Musset done so. One had to live up to one's position as a poet—even in Montreal.

His friend Louis Dantin, in his excellent little biography, has given two little anecdotes which contain the quintessence of Nelligan's folly. More than once harassed by some obsessing dream, feeling himself on the border-line of reason and madness, he remarked without thought: "Je mourrai fou," and

then recovering his pose, he would add, "like Baudelaire." The other tale is just as typical when M. Dantin asked him why he did not publish his verse with a publisher in Montreal, all the poet's reverence for Paris, the Mecca of his dreams, arose as he disdainfully cried: "Peuh! sait-il bien imprimer les vers. J'enverrai mes vers à Paris." Alas, he never sent them and the reverence of his friends alone obtained their issue in Montreal, when he had ceased to be in the rational sense.

Such was the idiosyncracies of this young man, "the Chatterton of Canada," as he has been inappropriately called. What was his genius? What is the value of his work? When languid or stiffened up, Lamartinish, head erect and all gesticulation he read his poetry at these soirées—there was genius, no sedulous aping of impossible manners of la Sainte Bohème. When the banal bourgeois of Montreal, with hungry tribes of sharp-faced lawyers and hardy engineers and their excellent femmes heard of him, they greeted his name with a shoulder shrug, ear high, and a "c'est un drôle de garçon." They were encountering an animal with which they had no previous experience—a poet.

First be it said, in reading him you will encounter an almost incomprehensible ignorance. It would be impossible for a youth at the Lycée to talk of Paderewski as a composer like Chopin. To Nelligan, who knows neither the pianist nor the dreamer of the nocturnes, they simply stand for the embodiment of music. No one would talk of the spiritual art of Rubens. Nelligan does—but Nelligan was only 19 and had never been in the Louvre. If you walk down St. Catherine street, Montreal, you will recognize that the majority of the faces you see there know little of life beyond Swift's "draw in nutrition, propagate, and rot." His want of ideas is akin to genius. But then on the other hand, how many who can tell a Giorgione from a Titian can write:

Ma pensée est couleur de lumières lointaines,
Du fond de quelque crypte aux vagues profondeurs;
Elle a l'éclat parfois des subtiles verdeurs
D'un golfe où le soleil abaisse ses antennes.

En un jardin sonore, au soupir des fontaines,
Elle a vécu dans les soirs deux, dans les odeurs;
Ma pensée est couleur de lumières lointaines.
Du fond de quelque crypte aux vagues profondeurs.

Elle court à jamais les blanches prétentaines,
Au pays angélique où montent ses ardeurs;
Et, loin de la matière et des brutes laideurs,
Elle rêve l'essor aux célestes Athènes.

Ma pensée est couleur de lumières lointaines.

Here is one who sings like the nightingale's wild wood notes, untrammelled by profound ideas on the impressionists or the ethics of M. Anatole France.

The little wayside Lady Chapel; the garden of childhood; a japanese fan; cups of Yeddo almost vital in their dainty porcelain charm; the sadness of Chopin, an immaterial Gretchen awakes on the white ivory keys: these are the motives of his song. The poet remembers a world of dreams,

"Où parfois radieux, dans un palais de foin,
Nous déjeunions d'aurore et nous soupions d'étoiles."

Losing himself in fancy, he wanders in the gardens of Watteau's embarkation for the happy Isle—the island home of our Lady of Cytherea; or, in that old deserted park of Verlaine's, he watches a veiled woman pass. Then amid diseased dreams, inspired by Baudelaire and Rollinat, the vision of his mother steals on him.

"Quelquefois sur ma tête elle met ses mains pures,
Blanches, ainsi que des frissons blancs de guipures.
Elle me baise au front, me parle tendrement,
D'une voix au son d'or mélancoliquement.
A l'autel de ses pieds je l'honore en pleurant,
Je suis toujours petit pour elle, quoique grand."

He has the young poet's morbid delight in "sadness" that drapes his youth in mourning for the joys he is too poor to possess. To Verlaine's "Colloque Sentimental," he, no doubt, owes this genuine poetic sadness, as also the following poem:

"Comme des larmes d'or qui de mon coeur s'égouttent,
Feuilles de mes bonheurs, vous tombez toutes, toutes.
Vous tombez, au jardin du rêve où je m'en vais,
Où je vais, les cheveux au vent des jours mauvais;
Vous tombez, de l'intime arbre blanc, abattues
Cà et là, n'importe où, dans l'allée aux statues."

Such are the echoes and the aspirations of Nelligan.

Now let us look at a little of the really pure ore he smelted. The sonnet entitled "Le Vaisseau d'Or", with its disastrous

shipwreck often seems to me the work of a really powerful imagination:

"Ce fut un grand vaisseau, taillé dans l'or massif.
Ses mats touchaient l'azur, sur des mers inconnues,
La Cyprine d'amour, cheveux épars, chairs nues,
S'étalait à la proue, au soleil excessif.

Mais il vint une nuit frapper un grand écueil
Dans l'océan trompeur où chantait la sirène,
Et le naufrage horrible inclina sa carène
Aux profondeurs du gouffre, immuable cercueil.

Ce fut un vaisseau d'or, dont les flancs diaphanes,
Recélaient des trésors, que les marins profanes,
Dégout, haine et névrôse entre eux ont disputé.
Que reste-t-il de lui, dans la tempête brève?
Qu'est devenu mon cœur, navire déserté?
Hélas! il a sombré dans l'abîme du rêve.

Of course it would have never been written if José de Maria de Heredia had not issued "Les Trophées"; but, all the same, its lines have the grandeur of the great sonnet. They sweep along with stately pomp in their stiff golden vestments at the solemn gait, so necessary to the ponderous slowness of the sonnet-thought evolving itself; and Nelligan has the gift of writing such lines as "La grande majesté de la nuit qui murmure." He was extraordinarily sensible to the musical value of vowels; he did not forget the use of the file that must be attendant on every poet's work. He thought like a symbolist and wrote like a parnassian. He is the first French Canadian poet—a boy perhaps, recognizable still as a pupil from the shortness of his staying power and the inequality of his inspiration—but a boy with genius when the climax came.

Perhaps the best poem he ever read at the Chateau was that wild bacchic frenzy, "La Romance du Vin":

"Tout se mêle en un vif éclat de gaieté verte.
O, le beau soir de Mai! Tous les oiseaux en cheour,
Ainsi que les espoirs naguères à mon cœur,
Modulent leur prélude à ma croisée ouverte....

Je suis gai! je suis gai! Vive le vin et l'art!
J'ai le rêve de faire aussi des vers célèbres,
Des vers qui gémiront les musiques funèbres
Des vents d'automne au loin dans le brouillard....

Les cloches ont chanté; le vent du soir odore...
Et pendant que le vin ruisselle à joyeux flots,
Je suis si gai, si gai, dans mon rire sonore,
Oh! si gai, que j'ai peur d'éclater en sanglots.

Putting aside his charming ignorance, one could read the verses of Nelligan and never think of Canada. There is no cachet Canadien in his poetry. There is no local colour. He has not written a line of Canadian nationality. He has not sung the crystalline forest world of the great north whiteness, the immense inland seas, the romance of trail and warpath in the old days, or the romance of railroad and engineer to-day. His own country has hardly furnished him a phrase. Perhaps we should find nothing odd in a Parisian writing:

"Ah! Comme la neige a neigé!
Ma vitre est un jardin de givre—
Ah! Comme la neige a neigé!
Qu'est-ce que le spasme de vivre
A la douleur que j'ai, que j'ai!
Tous les étangs gisent gelés,
Mon âme est noire où vis-je? où vais-je?
Je suis la nouvelle Norvège
D'où les blonds cils s'en sont allés.

Once I suppose he came across Kipling's phrase: "Our Lady of Snows", and wrote a poem "Notre-Dame des Neiges", but there is no Canada in it. The cascades in his verse are of the Versailles park of Watteau's pictures, not the roaring tide of the falls at Niagara. The only deaths are those of young men tired of life and love, who die on the silent bowling green, where the columnal Faun of Verlaine laughs. Daulac's heroic band, Montcalm's heroic death, the martyrdom of Brebœuf—they do not exist for him any more than the Quebec Bridge disaster. His patrie was the country Watteau painted, Verlaine sang—where life is sweet between a blue rose dawn and a gold rose eve.

On April 2nd, 1900, at the last meeting of the Soirées the authors read what they considered to be their best work, published in a little brochure as the anthology of the club. The enthusiasm of the first meetings had gone, never to return. Personal jealousies had come to light in unexpected quarters. And Nelligan now was no longer there, when they had at last begun to realize that he was the finest poet among them all.

Emancipation of thought and word in French Canada has of course not yet been realized; but, this defunct club has laid a foundation. Charles Gill and Massicotte might have been poets, if the movement had continued; and so, too, might M. Gonsalve Desaulniers could he have always lived up to the standard he set himself in that charming little poem, "La Fille des Bois" which inspired the great French Canadian sculptor Hébert to one of his most successful works. But their music is all frozen now like that of the winter streams of their land. A great silence prevails broken only by one voice.

There was a poor young man, Albert Lozeau by name, who, born in 1868, at the age of sixteen, when about to enter a business house as clerk, was struck down by a terrible spinal disease. Lying all day in one of those unpleasant looking homes of the poorer French in the suburbs of Montreal, he had nothing to do but read. Like all young souls afflicted by pain, he turned towards the works of belles-lettres. He read Musset, Chenier, Hugo, and above all the moderns, Baudelaire and those inspired by Baudelaire. These poets inspired him as he laid idle, taught him to long to be a poet, urged him on to essay the arduous joys of Mont Parnasse. His world was not wide; its boundaries were those of Stevenson's land of counterpane. He could watch the world of men and nature from his sick room window. And there was music occasionally—music that ravished the hearts of all French Canadians in a sense unknown to the old world Frenchmen. Sometimes a friend would come bringing a book or willing to play the piano and sing. Sometimes a girl would come to cheer him for a nostalgia for woman and her sex obsesses this sick young man like all true Latins. But he was not dull. He had a fine soul. He was, in fact, as we shall shortly see, a true poet.

Soon his acquaintance learnt Lozeau was writing verse. A few of his pieces appeared surreptitiously in the French newspapers of Montreal. He showed a real talent. Friends interested themselves. Then came the Soirées of the Château de Ramezay and friends brought his pieces to read there, and so the sick man aided the movement. But he was so desperately poor he could never afford to issue them in a volume. But then Charles ab der Halden in his "Nouvelles Etudes de la littérature française-canadienne" devoted a whole study to the young

man and his fame was at once established. Sir Wilfrid Laurier defrayed the expense of his volume published at Paris and the French Canadians had attained a poet worthy of the name.

All the charming personality of this young poet, no feeble imitator of old world poets and with a musical sense of words second only to Nelligan himself, found expression in a delightful preface he wrote for his volume fittingly entitled "L'Ame Solitaire":—

"Je suis un ignorant. Je ne sais pas ma langue. Je balbutie en vers assez harmonieux (j'adore la musique) souples et lâches. Je n'ai pas d'idées. Je rêve et ne pense pas. J' imagine et je n'observe pas. J'exprime des sentiments que je ressentirai. Il m'est parfois arrivé d'exprimer que j'ai ressentis. J'ai vu des arbres à travers des fenêtres. . . . Je suis resté neuf ans les pieds à la même hauteur que la tête: ça m'a enseigné l'humilité. J'ai rimé pour tuer le temps, qui me tuait en revanche. . . . C'est par des bouquins que me passaient mes amis, que je me suis mis au courant, et que le mal de rimer m'a pris. Je dis le mal de rimer, mais pour moi ce n'était pas un mal, c'était plutôt un bien, qui m'a, je le crois sincèrement, arraché au désespoir et à la mort."

The sincerity of such writing is almost plaintive; and M. Lozeau is nothing if he is not sincere. He is a young man cursed with ill-health and who has become almost feminine in his sick-room sensitiveness. He is a young poet drunk with the beauty of words, the gift of song; but, yet the strong virile note that will be the essentially Canadian note of the future was denied to him. For the invalid can never know the splendid joy in life and life's wayfaring that health alone can give. The ardour of sustained song is therefore not his, for his brain works in swallow flights. As he himself says in "Le Piano Divin":—

Telle mon âme faible a des notes d'ivoire,
Une petite gamme y vibre, blanche et noire,
Mais quel amour saura jamais, sans dévier
En faire largement chanter tout le clavier.

The usual themes of the French Canadian poetasters are the lost causes their race is so touchingly attached to. A quaint patriotism for a France that is absolutely indifferent, a hatred more or less literary of the drapeau anglais and an adoration for the Roman Catholic Church that is pitiable. But fortunately all these Pindaric tediousnesses are as much absent in Lozeau's verse as in Nelligan's. For these two are the first poets, the first true artists in words of Canada

after the antiquated wedding-cake and keep-sake style of Cremazie, Frechette and Chapman.

It is perhaps as the poet of simple love Lozeau excels. Lying on his sick bed he has conjured up the vision of the eternal feminine at the tender hour of twilight in a way strongly reminiscent of de Musset's nights:—

Mon cœur est maintenant ouvert comme une porte.
Il vous attend, ma Bien-Aimée, y viendrez vous?
Que vous veniez demain ou plus tard, que m'importe?
Le jour lointain ou proche en sera-t-il moins doux?...

Une heure suffira. J'aurai vécu ma vie
Aussi pleine qu'un fleuve au large de son cours,
L'ayant d'une heure mieux que de jours fous emplie,
D'une heure, essence et fruit substantiel des jours....

And to him the Beloved comes like:—

Le soir nous enveloppe, indiciblement doux,
Comme un regard d'amour se promenant sur nous;

But as I have said he has but short flights of song and consequently works admirably in the concise condensed forms of verse so dear to imaginative minds. In a sonnet, for example, he regrets the passing of his friend Nelligan:—

Tu montais radieux dans la grande lumière
Enivré d'idéal, éperdu de beauté,
D'un merveilleux essor, de force et de fierté,
Fuyant avec dédain la route coutumière.
Tu montais emporté par ton ardeur première,
Battant d'un vol géant la haute immensité,
Et là, tout près d'atteindre à ton éternité,
Tu planais triste et beau, dans la clarté plénière.

Mesurant au regard le vaste espace bleu,
Tu sentis la fatigue envahir peu à peu
La précoce vigueur de tes ailes sublimes.
Alors, fermant ton vol largement déployé,
O destin! tu tombas d'abîmes en abîmes,
Comme un aigle royal en plein ciel foudroyé!

Intellectually Lozeau is Nelligan's master. Indeed the beauty he hymns is always intellectual:—

O Déesse par qui les épis lourds sont faits,
Mûris pour mon cerveau le blé d'or des idées.

Nelligan, on the other hand, has something that one cannot describe by any other word than that of genius. He is, in fact, the only literary genius that Canada has produced. In this he stands above all the other, and on account of this Lozeau's poetry is feeble and vapid after his. Again, Nelligan loved the hard definite beauty of things we can touch and see. Lozeau is moved rather by suggestion—those vague nuances of feeling that permeate sick souls in pain-stricken bodies:

Toujours il m'est resté dans l'âme, je ne sais
Quel persistant frisson d'extase et d'harmonie,
Et le songe lointain d'une fête infinie
Au cœur où depuis tant de maux sont passés.

So it comes about that the moon and music are with him perpetual source of inspiration.

Quand la lune au ciel noir
Resplendit claire et ronde,
Le vers en mon cerveau comme
Une eau vive abonde;
Il coule naturel comme une source au bois,
Avec des sons fluets de flute et de hautbois,
Et souvent les accords doux et mélancoliques
D'harmoniums plaintifs et de vieilles musiques.

Or again the vague suggestion of the autumn day evokes:

Ce jour a l'air d'un long crépuscule oublié.
L'heure lasse, comme un oiseau blessé, s'éploie.
Dans les arbres le vent passe en un bruit de soie.
Feuille à feuille s'abat l'orgueil du peuplier.

Finally Lozeau is no more Canadian than Nelligan. There is nothing Canadian here. The law of club and fang in the great white snows where the rare trail goes, the endless quest of the almighty dollar in hideous cities, the romance of the great railways spiderlike spreading their network of lines over the virgin land, the settler's hardships and the pettiness of the lives in semi-civilized districts are not here. But it must be remembered that those French with their artistic sense of form leavening the Teutonic lump around them still cling passionately to the old world charm and grace. The literature of France is the most conservative in the world. After Shakespeare and his contemporaries had built the fairy fabric of the romantic drama we find Racine still patiently striving in his

best plays to creep into the soul of Euripides. Similarly in Canada the French poets hark back and leave unsung the glamour of science, of the coarseness and brutishness of lives in the bush or in the soulless offices of American commerce.

Since poetry in literary history always precedes prose, it was necessary to wait a little before the prose writer came. At last, however, he came. He was a young journalist on French



M. RODOLPHE GIRARD, by Charlebois.

Canada's greatest newspaper, "La Presse", by name Monsieur Rodolphe Girard. M. Charles ab der Halden aptly describes him as "le jeune romancier Canadien le plus intéressant et le plus curieux." Indeed, one might go a little further and add he is the only tolerable novelist the French Canadians have pro-

duced. In including him in the present article I have stretched the scope of my title, for Monsieur Girard neither frequented the Soirées nor did he work in connection with their members. Yet his work indirectly owes its origin to them, and with this confession I would conclude that with him and Nelligan and Lozeau I have touched on the most interesting figures in the literature of that old New France beside the St. Lawrence's great stream.

After several rather amateur attempts at play-writing and in addition to two volumes of short tales, M. Girard has written four novels wherein he has essayed to paint the life of French Canada under the old French régime, in Papineau's days, again in 1860, and lastly to-day.

Of his first novel "Florence", which deals with the events of Papineau's ill-fated rising, the least said the better. It is an *erreur de jeunesse*, a young author's attempt to find his feet, and is marked with all the hatred for the flag of England, out of which every young French Canadian has to grow.

But his next work, "Marie Calumet", founded on the popular French Canadian song of that name, is without doubt a masterpiece of its kind. Too *gaulois*, even *grivois*, for most English ears it remains, however, as a masterly portrayal in Zola's manner of the apathetic, almost animal existence of the *Habitants* of Quebec. It is the frankest and wittiest novel in Canadian literature—an essay in Rabelaisian style. As a work of art, racy of the soil, it is probably the closest sketch of Canadian life yet portrayed. But the reader must be prepared to be shocked, if he turns to it. It is the strong crude vintage of youth determined at all costs to tell the truth.

It narrates the history of a farm girl who becomes the "engagée", as one says in French Canada, of M. le Curé. For the Curé of Ste. Apollinaire visiting his old friend the Curé of St. Ildefonse, discovers the latter (his housekeeper having died) living alone with his niece, a charming young girl of sixteen. The ménage, once the Curé's pride, is now in terrible disorder. The visitor is a man of the world, while the host is merely the type of unworldly Country Padre who lets things slide. "You must have a new housekeeper," says the cleric, "or the world will talk, and you know you are fond of good eating. I have the very girl for you—Marie Calumet."

In ten days the lady in question is installed and proves herself a treasure of a housekeeper, fat and forty, who loves to command a household and to whomsoever she once becomes attached, it is for in *saecula saeculorum*. On the first day of her arrival she said: "I must go and milk the cows of M'sieu le Curé." The next day it is: "Our cows give splendid milk." And on the third day: "I must take good care of those cows of mine." So she directs the presbytery and hence the village. She is queen of the Curé's poultry yard, mistress of his cows, bullies him, and brings up his niece—and all with the devotion of an old-fashioned servant. Soon, however, all these treasures summed up in one person attract the amorous masculine eyes of Narcisse "l'homme du Curé" and Zéphirin "le bedeau." The history of their deadly rivalry for Marie Calumet's charms forms the plot of the book. Typical of the Habitant French, the timid proposal of Narcisse to his heart's charmer may be cited:—

"Puis, après avoir enlevé sa casquette de drap, lourde de pluie, et avoir fait quelques pas vers Marie Calumet, il dit:

—Mamzelle Marie, ça vaut pas la peine de *fafiner* plus longtemps, à cause que vous savez, comme dit m'sieu le curé, tout ce qui traîne se salit.

La ménagère abandonna sa lavette, Suzon son torchon, et le curé sa pipe.

Mamzelle Marie, j'prendrai pas trente-six détours, voulez-vous de moé pour votre homme?

Narcisse, c'est évident, avait dû se faire la leçon et tenter un effort surhumain pour parler avec tant d'assurance.

Il ajouta:

—J'sus pas riche, mais j'ai bon pied, bon œil. Et pis, sans compter que j'vous aime ben. A nous deux on pourra élever une famille crequiennement. Pas vrai, m'sieu le curé?

—T's raison, Narcisse.

Cependant Marie Calumet ne disait rien.

Elle essuya, sur son tablier, ses mains visqueuses d'eau de vaisselle.

—Voulez-vous, mamzelle Marie? demanda Narcisse qui redoutait un malheur.

—Oué, Narcisse, acquiesça enfin Marie Calumet.

Elle lui tendit les mains.

—J'serai une bonne femme pour toé.

Puis se tournant vers le curé:

—M'sieu le curé, poupa et mouman sont morts—que le bon Dieu ait leur âme en son saint paradis—voulez-vous les remplacer et m'donner à c'brave garçon?

Le curé ne trouvant pas son mouchoir, s'essuya les cils du revers de la main.

—Oui, mais qu'est-ce je vais devenir sans toi?

—Ah! laissez faire, m'sieu le curé, veus verrez comme tout ça s'aman-
chera ben. . . .

Au bedeau, qui entrain, Suzon dit malicieusement:

Zéphirin, je te présente m'sieu et madame Boisvert."

The consequent revenge of le bedeau has neither rhyme or reason in its Zolaesque touches. But nothing except a first hand perusal can convey an idea of the vividness and naturalness of the whole. Scene after scene passes before the eyes with all realism of life itself. It is the true picture of the ways and thoughts of "les habitants" of Quebec. But various scenes, in particular the latter chapters of the book, have a broad and even unsavoury realism of the stables that mars what otherwise is an excellent novel.

As may be naturally supposed this introduction into Canada of the church-banned, excommunicated, ostracized realism of naturalists like Emile Zola raised a storm. Even more audacious than the good clerics of Montreal had ever dreamed of, he essayed to picture the country life of a Quebec village through a pair of borrowed realist spectacles perched on the impudent nose of youth. And woe betide the bookseller in Quebec to-day who dare display a book of Zola in his window. But here was one of their own flock determined to out-Zola Zola himself. From the critical point of view to attain this M. Girard has introduced numerous gauloiseries that are needless. But of the truth of the general picture, of the biographical touches in the book there can be no doubt. It is the first great novel Canada has produced in either French or English. For it rises above the stories we merely read to pass away an idle hour. Indeed no historian, no chronicler who wishes to paint a true version of life fifty years ago in French Canada can afford to be without it.

Intimidated by the storm of indignation he had succeeded in raising and an attendant law suit, which, however, was decided in his favour, M. Girard in his next work turned for material to the old French régime in Canada. "L'Algonquine" is hardly a success as an historical novel for it is grossly inaccurate and as a romance it is too palpably impossible. Sir Gilbert Parker's "Seats of the Mighty" and C. D. Roberts's "A Sister to Evangeline" still remain the best works of the Canadian contribution to this kind of writing.

His last novel is "Rédemption", by far his most ambitious piece of work. It is evidently the result of a careful perusal and study of Tolstoi's "Resurrection." In fact, it is what the French call a *mélange*—a dash of Lamartine, a good splash of the younger Dumas added to the great Russian. For the first time M. Girard essays to paint the life of Montreal, the large city of Canada. From here the scene shifts to a very little frequented portion of French Canada known as the Gaspé coast, where the fisher folk living round the Baie des Chaleurs cut off from the rest of French Quebec speak a dialect of their own—a curious race of transplanted Bretons and gallicized Irish. Into the Gaspé Basin at the beginning of Canadian history Champlain the French explorer came sailing as he supposed on the direct route for far Cathay. And it is the same land to-day as it was three hundred years ago, very little changed by steamers and railroads, where those Acadian settlers eke out their penurious lives fishing the cold northern seas. To one of their villages comes a young man of Montreal's *jeunesse dorée*, by name Réginald Olivier. In Montreal's French world of fashion he has found himself falling in love with a girl, Claire Dumont, one of those creatures born to love and to be loved greatly. But the recollection of his parents' unhappy marriage has made him forswear matrimony. At Paspébiac (you can find it on the map) Olivier a few days after his arrival encounters a veritable flower of a fishergirl, Romaine Castilloux. He first perceives her in the village church:—

"Enveloped in the sunlight filtering through one of the large barred windows, just like a saint aureoled in gold, a young girl sat at the little church organ. Her half-turned face presented the purest profile that one could wish to see. Her nose was slightly aquiline, her mouth proudly arched, her chin neither square nor round, but yet energetic and sweet. Framing her forehead in an opulent mass of red gold hair, her chevelure was parted on her shoulders into two long heavy tresses. Her complexion had the dazzling white of girls with auburn hair and it was slightly tanned by the sea sun. Her features reflected candour and pride, the coldness of a young girl and at the same time the passion of a grown woman."

For this fisherman's daughter the slumbering love of Olivier is awakened again with redoubled violence. Declaring his love, he yet recognizes that it is impossible for him to marry her. Consequently once again he determines on flight before

any irrevocable harm is perpetrated. But Romaine learning of his intention persuades him to stay. He remains but ever tells her he must go. She must remain as he found her. At last Romaine comes to recognize the truth of this and while making up her mind rows out to sea, when a storm springs up and the sea calls the sea-girl home. Distracted with grief and unassuaged love Olivier returns to Montreal to find his first love Claire ruined by a wealthy manufacturer of Church ornaments and proprietor of a newspaper that is a pillar of the Roman Catholic church. From this degradation Olivier rescues her, and to end the gossip of his friends and enemies he offers to marry her. But Claire refuses. She cannot bring him dishonour—she is his always, if he wishes; but, not in marriage. Like a true younger Dumas heroine she now dies in a rapid consumption. Olivier utterly forlorn decides to return to Paspébiac and settles in the old home of Romaine Castilloux, where he lives feeding on memories of the past.

In his description of the fashionable monde of Montreal there are numerous errors of taste, evidences of ignorance in social etiquette, clichés worthy of Ouida; but, once on the Gaspé coast with the simple fisherfolk M. Girard is again in his own element. The life of these remote fishers is admirably described. The sea that is their cradle, their bride and their winding sheet makes all the pages devoted to them musical. The hardness of life, the mutability of storm and calm, the treachery of the dark green rolling waters and the beauty of the pageants of the sky pass before us.

“On était aux premiers jours de septembre. N'eut été la brise, qui se faisait plus froide après le coucher du soleil dans la baie, en ne l'eut pas cru. Car si les printemps sont longs, brumeux, sales à Paspébiac, les arbres paresseux à bourgeonner jusqu'à ce qu'un matin, au réveil, on les voit qui se sont couverts tout à coup de feuilles d'un vert cru, les étés sont admirables et ne disparaissent qu'à la dernière extrémité, lorsque les hivers tardifs les mettent à la porte en les poussant par les deux épaules comme un visiteur qui ne veut pas s'en aller.

* * * * *

Reginald et Romaine, accoudés sur le garde-fou du pont, au dessus du barachois, étaient restés longtemps à regarder monter un certain membre de pêcheurs de retour du Nord.

Ici, c'était la femme d'un pêcheur, là, son garçon et sa fillette, pieds nus, débraillés, qui étaient venus au-devant du mari ou du père, suivant

une charrette trainée par un bœuf. Les pêcheurs, s'entr-aidant, hissaient sur les charrettes leurs coffres et des barils contenant du lard, des biscuits, de la melasse, du thé, des pois.

Au Nord, en effet, les pêcheurs reçoivent tous les samedis leur prêt, provisions que les compagnies leur allouent pour la semaine. C'est ce qu'ils économisent sur ces provisions qu'ils rapportent à l'automne dans leurs familles. Ces épargnes leur seront utiles durant l'hiver qui s'en vient, car ils n'auront pour vivre durant la morte saison, que le reste du fruit de leur pêche de l'été, et ce qu'ils pourront gagner de côté et d'autre en battant au fléau pour les cultivateurs à l'aise, et en buchant du bois.

Cette année la pêche avait été abondante. Aussi, les pêcheurs assez bien payés assaillaient-ils les magasins des compagnies, faisant déjà une brèche dans leur pécule avant de remonter la côte. Ceux qui ne savaient pas écrire—c'est-à-dire le plus grand nombre—et qui avaient pour habitude de tenir leurs affaires en ordre, marquaient leurs achats sur un petit bâton en bois au moyen de *coches*, espèces d'hiéroglyphes, faites au couteau.

Naturellement, ils n'oubliaient pas de glisser dans leurs goussets le flacon d'eau-de-vie qu'ils devaient vider entre eux, à même le goulot, avant même leur arrivée à la maison.

Chaque peuple a sa façon à lui de se montrer poli. Si le Japonais, pour vous prouver toute sa considération, vous offre en vous abordant un cigare ou une cigarette, le pêcheur de Pasbébiac tend à ceux qu'il veut honorer, lorsqu'il les rencontre sur la route, sa bouteille d'eau-de-vie. Malheur à quiconque refuse: c'est insulter grossièrement celui qui prétend marquer ainsi toute l'estime qu'il a pour vous et vous témoigner le désir qu'il a de vous être agréable. Ce qui n'empêche pas ces pêcheurs d'être de fort braves gens et de ne pas faire un abus de leur politesse."

Often, however, it must be confessed the local dialect makes difficult reading. But the book as a whole does not fulfil the high promise of Marie Calumet. The style is marked by want of care, lack of labour with the file. The descriptions are too often of the slap-dash style of brushwork that aches to hurry on to something new, to something that has just been freshly thought of. Sometimes, too, the French is poor; sometimes anglicisms invade the Gallic text or local words unsuitable for literary purposes jostle "les grands mots" the author has too evidently culled from his "Larousse."

But M. Girard is young and we may still look for something worthy of what he indicated he could do in "Marie Calumet."

BERNARD MUDDIMAN.